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SOME FACTS ABOUT ANTHONY ASTON

In his *Anthony Aston Stroller and Adventurer* (1920), Mr. Watson Nicholson has done a valuable service for scholarship, especially in reprinting the interesting autobiographical sketch of the once famous itinerant actor. Various statements, however, in Mr. Nicholson's discussion of Aston call for immediate correction.

In the first place, the exultation at the "discovery" of an important document was singularly unfortunate. As Coad has pointed out (*Modern Language Notes, XXXVI*, pp. 112-114), Aston's sketch of his life is listed in the catalogues of the British Museum and the Library of Congress, and was well known to Judge Daly and Mr. O. G. Sonneck, both of whom used it in their discussions of the American stage. It should also be noted that this work, which Mr. Nicholson says appears in no reference list or bibliographical table, is described at some length in Lowe's *Bibliographical Account of Theatrical Literature* (p. 10), referred to in Jeanette Marks's list of plays in her *English Pastoral Drama* (p. 188), and used by Wegelin in his *The Beginning of the Drama in America*, and by Hornblow in his *The Theatre in America* (I, 30-32).

Equally unfortunate is Mr. Nicholson's assertion (pp. 3-4) that "the details contained in the following pages represent all that is known about the once famous wag"—a statement which Coad is inclined to accept. As a matter of fact, a considerable amount of information regarding Anthony Aston, overlooked by Mr. Nicholson, is at hand in such well known productions as Genest's *Some Account of the English Stage* (III, 75-77), W. Clark Russell's *Representative Actors* (p. 15), Fitzgerald's *New History of the English Stage* (II, 48-50), and Dibdin's *Annals of the Edinburgh Stage* (pp. 35-40).

In possession of the information contained in these works, together with scraps of knowledge gleaned from other sources, let us examine some of Mr. Nicholson's conclusions regarding the character and doings of Aston. Taking too seriously the facetiousness of Chetwood and of Tony himself, he has, while rescuing Aston from the furious ignorance of Bellchamber,

nevertheless underestimated the stroller's ability as an actor and exaggerated his egotism and instability of character. It seems that Anthony on at least two occasions tried to establish himself permanently and go in for the presentation of legitimate drama. His unsuccessful attempt to establish himself in London in the winter of 1716-1717 has been handled at length by Mr. Nicholson. With this attempt should be compared Aston's interesting experiences in Edinburgh during the years 1725-1728. From the evidence assembled by Dibdin it is pretty clear that Aston came to Edinburgh in 1726 at the express invitation of the city magistrates—an unusual honor at the time—that he was held in high esteem by leading citizens of the town, and that he was a warm friend of Allan Ramsay, who wrote various prologues for his performances and praised him most lavishly in his *Some Hints in Defense of Dramatic Entertainments* (1727). One wonders if the Scottish poet was related to the "one Ramsay" who first inoculated Anthony with the "Itch and also good Latin" (cf. *Sketch*, p. 54). It is also clear that Aston intended to settle permanently in Edinburgh, and that he took his managership seriously. He spent considerable money on his performances, assembled a troupe of eleven actors besides himself, gave such dramas as *The Earl of Essex* and *Love for Love* in addition to his "Medley," and was able to put up a most skillful legal fight when his theater fell under the disapproval of the Scottish Magistrates. In view of his experience with Scottish law, we are not surprised at his successful opposition to the anti-theatrical bill of 1735; and there may well have been reasons other than Anthony's self-assurance to explain why he was allowed to represent the provincial actors before Parliament.

Aston's speech in 1735 has not been thoroughly understood by Mr. Nicholson. It does contain considerable gusto and nonsense, but Anthony probably knew what he was about. At least Theophilus Cibber says that he did. In his appendix to his *Dissertations on Theatrical Subjects* (1756) Cibber writes: "But when it [i. e., the proposed bill of 1735] was plainly perceived, this Bill was chiefly calculated to serve the Managers of two Theatres—it began to be treated with less Respect, than it was at its first Appearance; 'till, at length, even Tony Aston (a strolling Player of Interludes) of drole memory, was intro-

duced to the Bar, where he pleaded his Cause, in *Forma Pauperis*, before the Honourable Ch-m-n- of the C-m-te;—and, operating on the risible Muscles of the Gay, and Good-Natured, he fairly laughed it out of the House" (pp. 43-44).

Such incidents as those referred to above do not indicate that Aston was, to use the words of Mr. Nicholson, an ignorant and uncultured person in whom egotism, mendicancy, and coarse-mindedness are inherent faults everywhere shamelessly featured. Nor does Allan Ramsay's tribute to Aston in 1726 seem to support Mr. Nicholson's characterization: "Mr. Aston and his family live themselves, to my certain knowledge, with sobriety, justice, and discretion, he pays his debts without being dunn'd; is of a charitable disposition, and avoids the intoxicating bottle."

Nor must we censure Aston too severely, as Mr. Nicholson is inclined to do, for his boasts regarding his histrionic powers and his association with better society. There is every reason to believe that Anthony was an outspoken, perhaps over ardent, champion of what he considered to be justice and his own rights; consequently, when in his *Sketch* and his speech in Parliament, he expresses a willingness to pit himself against the leading actors of the day, we must remember his own words which follow one of these boasts: "I am obliged to appear thus vain, because of the many repulses, Shams, and Male-Treatment I have received from those in Power." His experiences at London in 1717 and at Edinburgh in 1727 prove that this is not an entirely unjustified remark. Again, when he claims in his speech before Parliament that he has often been invited to show his "Medley" in the "Private Apartments of the Heads of Colleges and Noble and Gentlemen's Houses," Anthony is indulging in no especially egotistical or boastful talk. That he did manage to move among a higher class of people than was ordinarily accessible to an itinerant actor is proved by his experiences in Edinburgh; and that he took especial pains to associate with those who were on an equality with his Staffordshire ancestors is shown not only by his sketch of his life, but by the words which concluded his advertisement, when, in 1716, he brought from Bath to London his Welsh "mock voice" and other curiosities: "Any person of quality, or others, may

command him to their houses, etc., by sending word to the place above (Fitzgerald, II, 50).

Anthony's son is worth discussing briefly here. A document quoted by Dibdin (p. 40) shows that in 1715 Aston received permission from the Lord Mayor of Dublin to present his "Medley" in that city, and that his son, who two years later is advertised as being an actor of only ten years of age, took part in the father's entertainment. Another document, cited by Dibdin, proves that this son was named Walter, perhaps in honor of Anthony's distinguished kinsman, Walter Aston (1584-1639), eldest son of Sir Edward Aston, of Tixall, Staffordshire, and patron of the poet Dryden and Baron of Forfar in the Scottish peerage. The same document also shows that Anthony's son apparently married above himself at Edinburgh in April, 1728, where he and his father were imprisoned "as supposed to have enticed away that young gentlewoman," that is, a certain "Mrs. Jean Ker." The hero of this adventure, it may be added, is apparently the Walter Aston who wrote "The Restoration of King Charles II, or, The Life and Death of Oliver Cromwell. An Historic-Tragi-Comi-Ballad Opera"—a piece which was forbidden to be performed and was consequently published in 1733, with a vindication of the author against the unjust censure that his production had aroused.

Mr. Nicholson, (p. 38) remarks that "at one time during his career Tony was afflicted with consumption, against which he seems to have put up a winning fight." Mr. Nicholson does not cite his authority for this statement. If it is possible that he has based his remark on Chetwood's facetious comment that Aston, after tricking a certain landlord, paid him "when his *Finances* were in Order, and cur'd of the Consumption," then he has made a curious blunder; for Chetwood is speaking not of a bodily ailment but a disease of which a no less robust person than Sir John Falstaff complained.

Some idea of Aston's personal appearance is appropriate in connections with the assertion that he was a consumptive. The frontispiece of the British Museum copy of *The Fool's Opera* contains a scene presumably taken from the piece, in which Aston is revealed as a rather tall and slender personage. In one corner of the frontispieces is an inset medallion. Mr. Nicholson says (p. 43) that it is "labelled Tony Aston." This,

however, is a mistake. It is not "labelled," but a former owner has written on the fly-leaf that the inset is the only known portrait of Aston. The face thus revealed is evidently that of a lean and droll person. Such a description of the comedian is supported by a statement made by Thomas Davies, who was in a position to know what he was talking about. In the early eighteenth century, says Davies, when Pierre, challenging the conspirators in Otway's *Venice Preserved*, addressed one of them as

"Oh, thou! with that lean, withered, wretched face!" it was customary for an actor "of a most unfortunate figure with a pale countenance" to half-draw his sword and confront his accuser. Aston was "the last performer of this ridiculous part" (cf. Dutton Cook, *On the Stage*, I, 248). Davies's comment is better evidence than Chetwood's remark for saying that Tony was at one time afflicted with consumption.

Mr. Nicholson, it may be noted in passing, fails to note that Aston, like Dogget, acted Shylock in the ridiculous fashion made necessary by Lansdowne's version of Shakspere's play, and that on January 9, 1722, Anthony was announced to act the part of Fondlewife at Lincoln Inn Fields, his first appearance at this theater (*Genest*, III, 75).

A minor matter in connection with *The Fool's Opera* calls for discussion. Mr. Nicholson (pp. 41-2) conjecturally assigns the British Museum copy of the production to the year 1730. This is the date assigned to the piece in the British Museum Catalogue. Lowe inclines to the year 1731. It is possible that there were two editions of the production, one of which was specifically dated 1731, for "The Fool's Opera, or the Taste of the Age" is definitely assigned to that year in Egerton's *Theatrical Remembrancer* (p. 176), where it is listed under anonymous plays; in Barker's *List of Plays* (p. 105), where it is assigned to "Medley"; and in the 1812 edition of *Biographia Dramatica* (II, 243), where it is conjecturally assigned to Aston. If the words "To which is prefixed A Sketch of the Author's life, Written by Himself," printed on the title-page of the British Museum copy of Aston's opera, appeared on that of the edition listed by Baker and others, then it is rather strange that none of them took the trouble to see who the author was. It is, of course, quite possible, on the other hand, that they

were not sufficiently interested to consult the *Sketch*, especially since it is not “prefixed” to but follows the text of *The Fool’s Opera*. Be this as it may, the edition of the production dated 1730 by Mr. Nicholson and the British Museum Catalogue was evidently published some time after the appearance of Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* in 1728. This is revealed by the interesting “A Ballad, Call’d a Dissertation on the Beggar’s Opera,” which follows the text of Aston’s play.

Finally, Mr. Nicholson makes no attempt to determine the date of Aston’s death. Russell, on what authority I know not, states that he died in 1753 (*Representative Actors*, p. 15, note 2). That he was dead in 1756 is proved by the words “of drole Memory” which Theophilus Cibber applies to him in the *Dissertations* quoted above.

THORNTON S. GRAVES

University of North Carolina